

County Council



Cabinet Member Reports

19 November 2015

9a. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

High Speed 2 Update

Buckinghamshire County Council gave evidence to the HS2 Select Committee during the week commencing 12 October 2015. I presented three times to the Select Committee. Initially I gave an introduction to Buckinghamshire and told the Committee that the ten years of construction impacts from HS2 should be seen in the context of the growth pressures facing the county. I also then presented on the inadequacy of the Government's proposed Community Compensation Fund and lastly on the need for extensive mitigation at Steeple Claydon.

A number of assurances were offered by HS2 Ltd just before and during the Hearings. These are being worked through to ensure the wording fully addresses the concerns of our communities. The assurances will include measures to address capacity issues at 20 junctions throughout Buckinghamshire and a further 40 junctions, where safety assessments will be carried out to enable measures to be put in place to manage HS2 traffic. The work to assess the impacts and the detailed measures will be funded by HS2 Ltd.

To address community concerns in Amersham we have secured HS2 Ltd's agreement that they will take appropriate measures to prevent workforce and construction traffic parking in the on street parking bays on Whielden Street or in the Amersham Old Town and surrounding area.

We have also secured assurances to assess, and for HS2 Ltd to fund, mitigation outside schools on HS2 construction routes.

The Council has secured agreement for all authorities along the route of HS2 that HS2 Ltd will:

- Strengthen rural roads prior to construction
- Repair the highway during and post construction
- Assess and pay for measures to address impacts on Public Transport, home-to-school transport and Adult Social Care transport services

The details of these will be taken forward through the route wide Highways Subgroup with other Highway Authorities.

One significant concession by HS2 is not to use a planned spoil dump at Shepherds Furze Farm near Steeple Claydon. The removal of this blot on the landscape – where over one million tonnes of waste was to be tipped - was one of the ten principle asks in the Blueprint for Buckinghamshire which the Council is leading on.

We continue to seek to address new impacts identified by HS2 Ltd and so the team are reviewing Additional Provision (AP4) and Supplementary Environmental Statement 3 (SES 3) issued by HS2 Ltd on 16 October. This contains details on the extension of the Chilterns tunnel to South Heath. It also set out new impacts relating to the relocation of the Heathrow Express depot to Langley. Officer negotiations continue with HS2 Ltd to secure measures addressing impacts ranging from water and flooding concerns to the relocation of the Hillingdon Outdoor Activity Centre (HOAC) to Denham quarry.

The Select Committee has also been hearing evidence from local petitioners and stakeholder groups in north Buckinghamshire. The team have held more than 40 drop in sessions in the past two months to support petitioners preparing their evidence. It is not yet known when the Select Committee will next report on decisions they make and they may make interim announcements before the Committee completes its hearings in 2016.

Following a letter from the Buckinghamshire Councils and supported by our MPs, HS2 Ltd held information events on 16 October at Ballinger and 7 November in Wendover, where residents could ask questions around engineering, environmental and compensation issues. We are working with the independent HS2 Residents Commissioner for more information events along the 60km length of line in the county and in other Buckinghamshire communities which will be affected by HS2 construction traffic to be held by HS2 Ltd in the New Year.

County Council Finances

At the half year stage we are currently forecasting an overspend compared to budget in 2015/16 of £1.8m. Action plans are being formulated to try to bring spend back in line with budget. However, if this overspend materialises it will bring our unallocated reserves (General Fund) down to just below £16m. As a Council we have tried to keep the level of unallocated reserves to above 5% of the net operating budget (which is approximately £16.4m). When setting the budget for 2016/17 we will need to carefully look at this in more detail as the financial risks in the current climate have never been higher and reserves have come down quickly over the last few years.

We are currently awaiting the Spending Review announcements on the 25 November, which will inform us of the overall level of cuts to local government over the next Parliament. However, even then it is unlikely that we will get our specific funding details until just before Christmas. Nevertheless we have made certain assumptions and Cabinet and Deputy Cabinet Members have been reviewing the options for setting a balanced and robust budget over the next four years. This is likely to mean that further difficult decisions will need to be made as there is no longer any 'low-hanging fruit'!

When we started the process we knew we had to achieve £49 million of savings by 2017/18, as part of the existing MTP. The hope was that Portfolio's would have a period of stability in which they could concentrate on achieving these savings rather than any new savings over the next two years. However, some of the existing savings are proving challenging and other pressures are emerging, particularly within the Health & Wellbeing Portfolio, due to a combination of rising demand and the increasing costs per client (and this is before the impact of the National Living Wage). This all means that additional savings are having to be found immediately which is putting huge pressure on our Services. I know I said this last year but the budget process this year really is proving to be the most challenging one yet!

I will, of course, keep you all posted once announcements are made. Cabinet still hopes to agree a draft budget in early January that will then go out for consultation and scrutiny by the FPR Select Committee.

England's Economic Heartland Strategic Alliance

Recent announcements have served to emphasise the opportunity for the Strategic Alliance initiative to place the infrastructure requirements of the area at the heart of debates nationally.

The commitment of the Government to fast track the establishment of a statutory National Infrastructure Commission with a remit to identify strategic infrastructure needs is significant. The scope of the Commission includes many of aspects of strategic infrastructure that the Alliance initiative has previously identified as essential to enabling sustainable economic growth. With the Commission focusing initially on transport requirements for the Northern Powerhouse and London ahead of next year's Budget, it is important for the Alliance partners to ensure we place our requirements into decision making at the highest level.

The Government promoted amendment to the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill that supports sub-national transport partnerships is also noteworthy. Where such partnerships are emerging – such as Transport for the North – there is the opportunity for local partners to secure influence over national investment programmes in ways that are unlikely to be realised through more localised deals.

Reaction to the Strategic Transport Proposition submitted to the Chancellor and Secretaries of State continues to be positive. I joined my fellow County Council Leaders in meeting with the Political Leaders of Milton Keynes, Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough Councils. As a result, all four authorities have confirmed their commitment to join the Strategic Transport Forum. At the same time an invitation has been extended to SEMLEP to join the Forum.

Preparations for the first meeting of the Forum are now in hand. Projects already identified as being of interest for the Forum include east-west transport connections, the identification of a 'major road network' that is wider than Highways England's Strategic Road Network but which is essential in supporting the local economy, and opportunities to improve the resilience of the transport network.

The ambition of the Strategic Alliance has always been to look beyond transport and at strategic infrastructure requirements in the round. The Alliance Leaders have already identified digital infrastructure as a focus for further work. However, the remit of the National Infrastructure Commission may encourage the Leaders to accelerate their consideration of broader strategic infrastructure requirements: a discussion point for the next meeting of the Alliance Leaders in mid-November to which the Unitary Authorities have been invited to attend.

I will be presenting an overview of the Strategic Alliance at the annual conference of ADEPT (Association of Directors of Environment, Planning and Transport). It will also feature at the forthcoming Highways UK event in London at the end of November.

Health and Wellbeing Board

The most recent Health and Wellbeing Board meeting was held on 1st October. Following agreement at the Board's development day on 8 September to invite the Leaders of all the District Councils and the Chief Executives of Oxford Health

Foundation Trust and Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust to all future meetings, new members were welcomed to the Board.

As part of a wide ranging agenda the Board reviewed the whole system resilience plans to ensure that in Buckinghamshire we are prepared for the seasonal increase in people seeking health and social care support over the winter period. It was noted however that the system is now seeing high levels of demand all year. A key component of our joint plan is ensuring that people take steps to help protect their own health and seek appropriate help when they need it. The public can help themselves by taking up flu jabs when offered and an app has been launched to help people find the right level of help for simple conditions. The Board also reviewed the commissioning intentions for the Clinical Commissioning Groups and Buckinghamshire County Council which reflected the core priorities in the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy particularly around helping people stay healthy and independent, preventing illness and supporting people with long term conditions to have more control over their own health and care. There was a strong focus on building support and care around people and the places in which they live, with development of services in geographical localities and joining up health and social care services.

Reports were also received from the Children's Safeguarding Board and the Adult Safeguarding Board and an update on the Children's Services Improvement Plan and peer review.

The Board reviewed progress on the countywide physical activity strategy. This was one of the first priorities identified by the Health and Wellbeing Board and progress had been made on all aspects of the strategy from developing physical literacy classes in primary schools to increasing physical activity levels in older people.

The next meetings of the Board will review countywide plans in light of the settlements received by the NHS and local government in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review and review the approach to prevention across Buckinghamshire.

National Representation

The Local Government Association (LGA) is a politically led cross-party organisation, representing local authorities across England and Wales. Its membership includes English councils, fire and rescue authorities, the 22 Welsh councils in corporate membership through the Welsh LGA, and national parks authorities via the English National Parks Authority Association. The LGA seeks, where possible, to work on the basis of consensus across all political groups.

I am delighted to have been re-appointed to the LGA's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport (EEHT) Board, which is chaired by Councillor Peter Box of Wakefield Council. The EEHT Board is one of ten LGA boards, each of which helps to establish and scrutinise LGA policy and lobbies Central Government on behalf of the 414 councils represented by the LGA.

This role will provide the opportunity, on behalf of Buckinghamshire, to comment and provide views on a significant quantity of policy papers as part of the process of refining the LGA's policy position on matters relating to EEHT. I will consult with LGA colleagues on these policy proposals in order to provide more comprehensive and meaningful feedback to inform the Board's, and therefore the LGA's, priorities and policy lines.

The role will involve working with the Chairman and other Board members to develop the programme plan for the Board, deputising for the Chairman in his role as principal representative of the LGA where appropriate, attending residential conferences and other events initiated by the Board and leading and chairing sessions as required.

Broadband Update

Connected Counties rollout progress

Members are reminded that the programme seeks to ensure countywide fibre connectivity is extended to 90%+ of premises (business and residential) and details of areas enabled thus far can be found on the Connected Counties website (<http://www.connectedcounties.org/rollout>). This includes the ability to validate individual phone numbers and addresses and use a variety of maps for visual reference (www.connectedcounties.org/check-availability).

Within Buckinghamshire with nearly 40,000 homes and businesses are now connected to fibre broadband. The fibre rollout is 81% (nearly 90% based on homes and business connected) complete in Bucks and on target to be completed by March 2016. The final two phases of delivery will be challenging, incorporating some locations that have incurred delays and also a focus on deploying fibre to the premises technology, which requires a slightly different engineering approach.

In terms of take-up, monthly data confirms that this has now increased to 24% across the project as a whole. In addition, 50% of the upgraded cabinet locations are less than 6 months 'old', meaning take-up should increase as they continue to mature. Targeted marketing and communications continues to be used in areas where take-up has been slower (see demand stimulation).

In terms of communication, the latest Connected Counties newsletter has been issued, the website has undergone further enhancement, cabinet stickers are being placed in new 'live' locations (3 versions, including a smaller one in AONB areas), targeted leaflet distribution using two local companies is ongoing, a programme of direct correspondence with businesses/Parishes/Councillors is underway and PR is being issued (generally via the Local Enterprise Partnership) linked to relevant stories and milestones achievement. In addition, the team continues to respond to large numbers of enquiries from the general public, MPs and other interested parties. In parallel, the Government and BT are issuing regular communications to MPs, to keep them abreast of local progress.

In relation to the Universal Service Commitment, the Government has now launched two 'soft' trials in Suffolk and West Yorkshire. The idea is that this will test and improve process and also allow for some initial assessments of possible demand. BDUK have also issued more detail in the form of FAQs, explaining how the application process will work and who will be able to access the scheme. This will centre on the redemption of a voucher, with a value of £350, which can be used to pay for the installation of a satellite broadband system (capable of download speeds of up to 22 Mbps).

It is anticipated that a launch across local areas will be staggered, but the scheme should be in operation in Bucks by the end of the year. The main question mark will be around demand from those who can claim the voucher (if they receive less than 2 Mbps) given the emphasis is very much on extending superfast broadband as far as possible. Despite improvements in satellite technology, in terms of speed, cost and performance, the general view appears to be that this is likely to be viewed as an interim measure.

Other activity

With Bucks funding for the Superfast Extension Programme confirmed by respective parties, BT is now developing proposals for extended speed and coverage in the Vale. This will ask that BT models over £4m of District Council, Local Enterprise Partnership and Government funding (£1.6m specifically within the Vale), subject to specified requirements.

It is anticipated that BT will issue proposals in December, which will then be subject to detailed evaluation. The LEP Digital Infrastructure Group will be the conduit for this and agreement between all parties will be required before a deal is signed with BT. New funding opportunities are being explored, which may enable extended superfast broadband coverage, subject to requirements and the outcomes of the upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review. There may be significant opportunities to further superfast broadband coverage, as part of the clawback discussions. In parallel, BDUK is in the process of negotiating with the EU on grounds of State aid, to ensure that public funds can continue to be legally invested in broadband infrastructure.

BT has recently made a number of announcements aimed at supporting the Government's agenda to ensure ubiquitous superfast broadband connectivity. This is focused on expanding BT's technology base, incorporating new approaches that can provide solutions to challenging locations where existing fibre technology is ineffective. We will be keeping a close eye on the ramifications of this locally. The company has also committed to commercially rolling out enhanced capabilities that, when combined with other equipment, could enable speeds of up to 500 Mbps.

BT is also in discussion with Government on the scope to increase the universal service commitment to 5-10 Mbps and how that could be achieved with the technology announced above, alongside ongoing trials. Finally, BT has made a commitment to be more proactive in supporting communities directly with local issues, including isolated projects outside of countywide BDUK activity (such as Connected Counties); it remains to be seen to what extent this will materialise.

Virgin Media is investing in Chesham as a test site to trial technology and applications, which may then be commercialised and deployed nationally. The service is now 'live' and benefitting local residents, businesses and visitors to the town centre. Virgin Media hopes to be able to expand upon its purpose and possibly trial other technology around the town. We are keen to accelerate for investment and also to see the Wi-Fi approach duplicated in other Bucks town where Virgin Media has a presence (such as High Wycombe, Aylesbury, Marlow etc).

There continues to be significant debate and activity at a national level around policy and regulation and how this can stimulate greater commercial investment in superfast broadband. Whilst the Government continues to explore the opportunity to increase minimum service requirements, Ofcom is undertaking a regulatory review of the marketplace, including the relationship of BT and Openreach. The results of this will not be known for some time, but the outcomes could be significant in terms of setting the scene for greater market competition and accelerated investment ultrafast broadband technologies. Ofcom has also recently endorsed new regulations that give customers more power to switch providers during their contract term, should advertised broadband speeds not be achievable.

In addition to supplier activity reported to Council in September, Aylesbury Vale Broadband is in the process of deploying a hybrid fibre solution in North Marston and Granborough, with the support of the Aylesbury Vale District Council loan financing. 4G

mobile coverage continues to extend to new parts of the County, including some rural locations, but this is unlikely to be universally accessible. Finally, we are seeking to trial some next generation satellite solutions with local residents/businesses, who are currently suffering from particularly poor speeds.

Syrian Refugee Crisis Update

The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate. Estimates from February 2015 indicated 12.2 million people being in need of humanitarian aid within Syria. 7.6 million had been forced to flee their homes and in excess of 3.8 million Syrians are in refugee camps in neighbouring Countries. This situation is worsening.

In addition to existing asylum seeker and refugee schemes, the Government established the Syrian Vulnerable People Relocation Scheme in 2014. The Prime Minister recently announced a significant expansion to this scheme which will now see 20,000 refugees arriving here in the UK by 2020. The UK will take 1,000 refugees by Christmas and Local Authorities have already been identified to receive them.

Buckinghamshire County Council and partners are working closely with the Home Office to fully understand the situation and what is required in order for councils to safely and appropriately be able to meet the needs of refugees.

It is important that long term funding is in place for councils to cover the costs not just of housing, but also of education, health, adult social care, children's safeguarding and the other services that refugees will require, particularly those with more complex needs. This type of extra Government financial support must be assured and will need to be maintained over a period of many years.

**MARTIN TETT
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**